

YEATS'S POLITICAL VISION THROUGH MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLS

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ABSTRACT

W.B. Yeats is one of the most prolific poet of his genre, whose poems had multifarious dimensions. This paper deals with the political vision of the poet. The political vision is found to be interpreted in terms of mythology, is the focal point of this paper. The colonization of the English power and the agonized turmoil of Ireland resulting to a trenchant degraded socio-political scenario are discussed herein.

KEYWORDS: Revolution, Socio-Political, Leda, Swan, SPHINX, Seduction, Helen, Patriotism, Nationalism, Religion, Architecture.

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INTRODUCTION

“Things fall apart ; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy loosed upon the world,”

[II-3-4, The Second Coming]

There is a mélange of different aspects and thoughts in Yeats's poem. W.B. Yeats was the poet of social predicament. In somewhat disillusioned middle age, Yeats nationalism became a pedagogue to the Irish Revolution and Theatre. He coined the genre of Celtic Twilight poetry highlighting the local traditions and Gaelic mythologies. He depended more on the archaic aspect to construct and define the present situation. The uniqueness of Yeats's lies in the blending of English and Irish Tradition. He was deeply influenced by poets like Shelly, Spencer and Blake. Together with this, he was considered as the Irish national poet.

The age of Yeats's extended from 1890 to 1939. This age in history is marked for its rapid social and political change. It was the time when the shades of the time when the shades of a totally different Modern age encroached upon the Victorian age. The thoughts, ideas, notions were totally different in the two ages. So a kind of tumult was created in the European countries. Especially, for England, it was a period full of radical changes. Moreover his poems incorporate the political and social issues. Before going deep to political conscious mind of the poet it is important to know the condition of the contemporary society. There was a complete breakdown from the agrarian life which led to the end of rural England. The process of urbanization had set in and the decline of society deeply reflected the literature of the period. The industrialization and urbanization brought problems like over-crowding, housing shortage, increase of vice and crime and many more. There was the loosening in sex taboos which led to the degradation sexual morality, and increase in sexual promiscuity. Religion of the period was also not devoid of the ill-effects, it became skeptic and agonistic. Political skepticism, general disillusionment, religious agnosticism, cynicism became the part and parcel of the then human life. The literature of the vividly

reflected all these ill-effects. In case of the sentimental poet W.B. Yeats's, it was hard to overcome the radical socio-political change.

"Leda And The Swan" also has in it Yeats's disgust for political power. Zeus, the king of Gods became fascinated by Leda, disguised as a swan and raped her. This was a popular myth in Greece. Yeats incorporated this story in his poem because he wanted to focus on the rueful politics of the upper-class. The past myth becomes the reflection of the contemporary society. The rape of Leda – the mortal woman by Zeus, the immortal and all pervading God have deep in the suggestion those human beings were mere puppets in the hand of God. Ellman says :

*" Some sort of cult is about to be born,
and there is even a suggestion of a new annunciation ;
another Leda would open her knees to the swan." (122)*

Thus Yeats, by his maudlin legend focuses on the political structure that has been always and present in his time. 'Leda' becomes a symbol of both the center of despondency and dominated human soul, who endures the pain inflicted on her by the upper class.

In "No Second Troy", Yeats says about his love for extraordinary woman, Maud Gonne. He says that he had been betrayed by her who had devoted her life in awakening the illiterate and ignorant populace to patriotic favor and partisan fanaticism. Yeats presents her as a great lady full of heroism as powerful as the classical woman of the past. All her energy was devoted in inspiring the mass with revolutionary and political ideals.

*".... she would of late
Have thought to ignorant men most violet ways"*

(u -2-3, No Second Troy)

The authority of a lady with shrewdness and political mind. She is compared to that genre of women who brought terrible devastations on the great cities. She is mostly compared to Helen. The physical beauty that is analogous to that grand and attractive description of Helen. Despite of the sensual connotation in the phrase, " beauty like a tightened bow", there is the innuendo towards the dangerous war. To be more specific, Yeats refers to the destructive beauty of Maud. She was not suitable to the 'unheroic age' as says the poet. The revolutionary activities of Maud Gonne, according to the poet, was in the sphere of timid and common people who would never realize the depth of vast political concern. There is a deep delved harmony in the thematic disposition of the two poems – "Leda and the Swan" and "No Second Troy". The heart rending seduction of Leda and the extraordinary fatherhood is the cause of the incredibly great offspring – 'Helen' and her far reaching effect in the socio political segment.

Yeats, in his poems made an amalgamation of political and religious objective. He refers to the seduction of Leda in "Leda and the Swan" which introduced the first known age of the world. The divine intervention was again repeated with the birth of Christ. Both the ages were at their full maturity. From the first era started in 1000BC the Christian era stood centuries late. Yeats takes a bold plunge of calculation in his world of imagination and prophecies the advent of another age. The messiah of this new age is thus imposed a monstrous attire. This is because, the modern age is full of decadence, corruption and degradation. B.P. Mishra may be quoted in support:

"One such poem is the Second Coming written with the Irish troubles, the Great War and other troubles in mind."
(102)

The prophetic tone in the title and the description of the monster hints the upsurge of the Antichrist. This male Sphinx becomes the icon of devastation and this way it is the only one who can win over the 'loosened anarchy'. The failure of the controller suggested by the falconer is significant of the uncontrollable and eroding socio-political scenario. Michael North in his essay 'W.B. Yeats: Cultural Nationalism' said,

"His classically liberal conception of freedom as the absences of exterior influence can hardly be compromised with his nostalgia for a communal past." (26)

"The Lake Isle Of Innisfree" is a beautiful poem as it is imbued with all the patriotism and nationalism of the poet's mind. As already told before, Yeats' political ideology is not different from his nationalism. This poem is about the ideal place, that Yeats dreamt of. The poem has a tone of 'conventional anarchism' when he says "Arise and go"; there is a reference to the story of the Prodigal Son. Yeats felt the staunch contrast between the crowded city of London and Sligo, the peaceful place. Yeats refers to Innisfree. The cottage recalls Ireland. The nationalism is mingled with Yeats's awareness of past. North says :

"Yeats sees Sligo through the prism of sophisticated primitivism akin to that of Simmel or Weber." (24)

Another reference to both politics and past is present in the Byzantium poems. The Byzantium poem is considered to be the richest instance of art, religion and culture. All the three aspects are related to politics undoubtedly. All buildings, pictures and images are 'perned' by the poet which throws multidimensional light. Politics is implacably and past is explicitly involved in the poem. The celebration of art in Byzantium denotes a calm socio-political situation of in the archaic city. 'Byzantium' refers to the ancient culture, art and the patronage of art. The 'great cathedral gong' that draws an end to the work-a-day schedule brings forth the workers class. The drunken soldiers recalls the savage British army who used to terrorize the peasantry. The 'Byzantium' is an extended and elaborate image of Innisfree from the point of view of a Utopian residence. The Emperor in 'Sailing To Byzantium' is a symbol of monarchy apart from art and culture. The socio-political categories are referred by Yeats. The three-tier social system – the ruler or the monarch, the worker or the peasant and the middle class or the intellectuals. The middle class, the artists are celebrated with full height.

Dr. Bhabotosh Chatterjee in his preface said,

"He communicate to us - through certain symbols –

a vision of life, and to grasp this 'vision', mere

tracking down of sources is not enough. What is

necessary is an understanding of life, its beauty

beastiality and tragedy, its complexity and inscrutability.

All the critics and connoisseurs of Yeats admit that all the symbols of Yeats are original and full of deep insight. They came up as an aftermath of intense thought. Yeatsian symbols carried multidimensional overtones and implications. He was aware of the society as well as his mind and juxtaposed all of them in his symbols.

The political thought and ideologies too were reflected through his symbols. To be more specific, Yeats made use of certain symbols, unique in them which had political connotation.

The 'Swan' is an important Yeatsian symbol. It denotes two different meaning. The 'Swans' symbolize permanence and unity. The society degenerating and demolishing day by day sets a stark background with contrasting colors to the theme of eternity and joy. This temperament is shown in "The Wild Swans at Coole" The poet expresses his weariness for the society and the political turmoil. Yeats states his mental condition,

"And now my heart is sore" (11- 14, Wild Swans At Coole)

The heart of the poet is 'sore' for the brackish reality. The castism, financial crisis, moral degradation and so on. The 'Swans' are one of the favorite symbol of Yeats - 'those brilliant creatures' are bright because the poet's 'heart is sore' with the conflicts, wars and deaths of the world around. Despite of this antithetical interpretation ; the 'swan' has another implication that is the authoritarian aspect of politics. In the poem "Leda and the Swan", 'swan' plays the most important role. Zeus, the king of Gods, the God of sexuality and the All - Father, who disguised himself as a swan and seduced Leda, the daughter of Tyndareus, the pathetic picture of the rape brings out dual meaning. The empowerment of God over man, superior over inferior, oppressor over oppressed is clear from this action. Hoffman said,

"Myth once more could being emotion, truth
and mystery into literature, but it must
be myth made new" (6)

So made Yeats. The myth of Zeus and Leda was made new. Leda is not a mere princess but the symbol of suffered human soul and Zeus symbolizes the authoritarian class. When we consider them as the people belonging to two different class or creed, then the seduction becomes a suppression. Moreover the suppression of the inferior by the superior was prominent in politics of both past and present. Zeus, the king of Gods molesting a feeble woman also symbolizes the power and ferocity of the ruling class. The suppression of woman in the patriarchal or male- dominated society is another political symbol.

Leda, in political context, becomes the symbol of a womb that gives birth to danger and destruction. Simultaneously, the 'Helen' symbol goes to it. 'Helen' the wife of Menelaus was the only center from which the conflict between the two great powers -Greece and Troy. 'Helen' becomes the epitome of war and death. Thus the two major ideas that woman serve, is deftly brought out by Yeats by the two legendary women - Leda stands for creativity and Helen for destruction. Both are political symbols. In the poem "The Second Coming", the Sphinx of the classical civilization. The gender of the image is subtly reversed to implement the status of a Messiah ironically. The decadent society and its degenerating power will end with the introduction of a monstrous Messiah. The gender of it is 'male', which denotes the patriarchal society, the pugnacious human power and the headstrong rule in political scenario. The repetition of 'Second Coming' twice with the word 'surely' shows the uncertainty in the poet's mind. The uncertainty is for the contemporary political system where the grip of the center is loosened. The 'anarchy' and 'blood – dimmed tide' is unleashed amongst the world ; the vortex of centralized power hints at decadent society and politics which may bring forth a bestial power. The masculine beastly image from the 'Spiritus Mundi' is the perfect successor of the 'mere anarchy'. Yeats had in his mind the turmoil of Ireland and the Russian

Revolution. According to Bloom ,

“To Yeats , like any other Gnostic , apocalypse

is the fiction of disaster , and “The Second Coming” is an oracle of an unavoidable future .” (324)

The place ‘Innisfree’ can be considered as another political symbol, or better to say, symbol of Yeatsian nationalism which is inseparable to that of Yeatsian politics. ‘Innisfree’ resembles the word ‘Innisfail’, the island of the stone, a poetic appellation attached to Ireland. The poet actually had in his mind ‘Sligo’ which he sees as a silhouette of refined primitivism. Innifree is the symbol of a free society, freedom of life, nature and existence. The place is away from the artificial city life of London, Innisfree is the place where dwells ‘peace’ and ‘relief’. The inadequacies of reality can be understood by the sentence,

“And I shall have some peace there”.

(ll - 5, The Lake Isle Of Innisfree)

Actually ‘Innisfree’ is the ideal world of Yeats which stands poles apart from the reality. The inadequacies of reality sharply makes all aware of the fact that the socio - political system was mechanized and devoid of all sensitiveness. Yeats had in his mind, in words of North,

“This ideological conflict amounts to a good deal more than a clash of definitions, for Ireland’s partition came about in part because of an inability on the part of its politicians to resolve the difference between nationalism and the liberal state”. (27)

Nonetheless, Yeatsian ‘Utopia’ is not as ‘airy’ as many other writers, it has a real identity which is in Lough Gill Co in Sligo. The poem, especially the place attempts to unite the personal with the community, the right and the duty, existence and hope. This symbol broadens in his mature poems and the place changes with the same thought at the core. The symbol or the place become “Byzantium”, revised, more rich and philosophical dwelling. The sailing, the land left back is very significant. The ‘mackerel crowded seas’ denotes the world of passion. ‘Sea’ is the imagery of passion which in a smaller scale may appear physical lust, but, in broader sense, it is the world that moves in a whimsical way. The ‘passion’ is symbolical for ‘blindness’ - mental, physical, socio – political. The world of passion is busy to acquire for the individuals where maturity is never counted. The ‘sailing’ denotes a voyage on the passion towards the world of insight and ‘perfection’.

The sailing by water to the primitive art – loving place, where the poet meets with the element ‘fire’. ‘Fire’ is again symbol of purgation and purification. Thus the world, the poet wishes to leave is not only full of lechery but also full of conflicts in broad sphere. Byzantium is the ideal world the poet may find peace because this place is the center of art and culture. Art and culture points at the calm political situation and social patronage. This place is immortal, because, it is devoid of blindness and tumults. Moreover, the symbol “Innisfree” is revised to “Byzantium”. Dr. Chatterjee says,

“It should be remembered, however, while recognizing the essential difference between the two poems, that the later poem is the fulfillment of the early one, that in ‘Byzantium’ Yeats realizes a vision which he grasps, although imperfectly, in ‘Innisfree’...” (32-33)

The main symbol that dominates Yeats’s poems are the idea of the perfect place, the ‘Utopia’, which is sheer apart from the contemporary socio – political unrest. Thus, the positive symbol is antithetical to the then system, but at the same

time, it has been a consequence of it.

In the poem “Easter –1916” the image of an evening sky also conveys a political symbol.

“I have met them at close of day

coming with vivid faces.

From counter or desk among gray

Eighteenth – century houses”.

(ll -1- 4, Easter 1916)

The ‘close of day’ suggests a pessimistic tone, it symbolizes the evening sky. The end of the day suggests a fatigue after a long drudgery. The pallor of the day is associated with the gray colour. The colour is again significant -the lifelessness of society, the dreary political system. Thus the socio political condition of eighteenth century is symbolized through the words and phrases.

CONCLUSIONS

W.B. Yeats is a poet of multiple qualities. He was deeply moved by the social and political tumult of the contemporary age. The ‘distopic’ condition of England compelled him to imagine the ‘utopic’ world. Yeats’s poem have an intertwined work of political and mythological, historic and contemporary, personal and philosophical ideas and innovations. Thus, Yeats despite of being specific conveys the political scenario as well as the consequences of it. This, he does perfectly by blending the contemporary and the conventional, the present and past.

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